

# REFRAMING COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS FOR IMPROVED ANALYSIS

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INTERNATIONAL  
SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS  
innovations in international development  
• assessment • planning • evaluation •

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# UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION (?)

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How questions are asked bias the answer.

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Development planning professionals have well established ways of asking questions.

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Today we will **challenge** the fundamentals of **two traditional ways of framing questions** when planning for development or a complex contingency.

# **TWO AVENUES OF QUESTIONING**

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**Deficits** versus **Assets**

&

**Conditions** versus **Characteristics**

# **THE NATURE OF THE “PROBLEM-SPACE”**

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Development and conflicted  
environments are:

**Systems-of-Systems**

**“Wicked”**

**“Socio-Ecological”**

# THE NATURE OF THE “PROBLEM-SPACE”

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## Systems-of-Systems

1. Physically distributed (all over the place)
2. High levels of diversity (heterogeneity)
3. Overall functionality dependent on linkages between nested distributed systems

*\* DeLaurentis and Callaway (2006) \**

# THE NATURE OF THE “PROBLEM-SPACE”

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## “Wicked”

1. No problem center (and constantly changing)
2. Stakeholders have different views
3. Resources and constraints change over time
4. Resists efforts to be changed by command

*\* Horst and Rittel (1973); Conklin (2003); Ritchey (2007)\**

# THE NATURE OF THE “PROBLEM-SPACE”

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## “Socio-Ecological”

1. Every node impacts every other node
2. Information and resources flow between all parts
3. High levels of diversity in all categories
4. People (including you) are integral
5. Emergent and adaptive

*\* Tidball and Weinstein (2011)\**



# THE PROBLEM

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Though developing or conflicted environments are complex and **highly dynamic** systems-of-systems, traditional **criteria** applied in assessment, planning and evaluation assume they are **static**.

# GOALS, OBJECTIVES, END STATES, etc...

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## “Traditional” Goals Include:

1. Fill needs or gaps.
2. Sustainable (3.) peace, stability and development (or whatever else).

# GOALS, OBJECTIVES, END STATES, etc...

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## 1. Fill needs or gaps

A **deficit** approach emphasizes  
**needs** and **gaps**, but...

...a nation can't be built (or repaired)  
with what it doesn't have!

# ASSETS VERSUS DEFICITS

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An “Asset-Based” approach to assessment and planning highlights what is present in the community

- Relationships - individuals, and organizations and associations (formal and informal, official and unofficial)
- Physical assets
- Social proclivities and mores

# GOALS, OBJECTIVES, END STATES, etc...

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## 2. Sustainable (3. ) peace, stability and development

Part one:

What does “sustainability” mean?

Part two:

“Peace” and “Stability” are conditions.

# GOALS, OBJECTIVES, END STATES, etc...

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## What makes for “real” sustainability?

**Internal positive socio-economic feedback loops are the mechanism of sustainability**

- “Real” sustainable development requires reinforcement of internal positive feedback loops
- Positive feedback loops are self-reinforcing: Success breeds more success
- External players rarely have much control over an environment, but they can identify, and catalyze or reinforce internal feedback loops that already exist, and spark new ones
- An asset-based approach can identify internal feedback loops and their mechanism and how to best reinforce them

# CONDITIONS VERSUS CHARACTERISTICS

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**With “traditional” goals and objectives planners chase the steady state condition of a place at a single point in time, and they hope that condition will persist.**

**It won't.**

# CONDITIONS VERSUS CHARACTERISTICS

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We've already identified that development and conflicted environments are characterized by **dynamism and change.**

**Furthermore, the promotion of positive feedback loops ignites dynamism and accelerates change.**



# HARNESSING CHANGE

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A new set of criteria are necessary to harness dynamism and change.

These new criteria must speak not to a condition of the system at a given time, but to the fundamental characteristics of the system itself.

# RESILIENCE

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## A **RESILIENT** system:

- Can change and adapt to shifting conditions, shocks, and traumas, but still maintain control of its functions and structure, and retain it's core identity.
- Is capable of self-organization (emergence) particularly in response to or in anticipation of changing conditions
  - Learns and adapts to changing conditions and pressures.

# THINKING IN RESILIENCE TERMS

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Thinking in **resilience** terms requires that we reframe our inquiry from questions about the day's **conditions** to underlying questions about the **characteristics** of the system itself.

# RESILIENCE QUESTIONS

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**Q: The resilience of what, to what?**

**Q: What do alternate states look like?  
(possible contingencies)**

**Q: How adaptable and transformative  
and in what ways?  
(receptiveness to change)**

# BRINGING THESE NEW APPROACHES TOGETHER

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Change is not only unavoidable,  
it is the key to a successful future.

**Deficit**-emphasizing approaches lead to lines of  
query focused on **conditions** at a given time.  
Both inherently ignore mechanisms of  
transformation.

An asset-based approach enables  
resilience lines of query.

# NEW APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

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How we work (**process**) is as important as how we think (**methodology**).

Low quality process =  
Low quality information inputs =  
Low quality plan = **FAILURE**

# PARTICIPATION

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**The cost of an asset-based approach is the increased participation of stakeholders in all aspects of assessment, planning and evaluation.**

**Sustainability is one byproduct of resilience**



**We can only understand resilience through an asset-based approach**



**We cannot be aware of assets without participation**

# PARTICIPATION

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**“Participation” must be genuine.**

**Marginal or purely rhetorical participation can be used to justify the desires or assumptions of the giver or manipulate the recipient without the risks associated with participatory input of substance.**

*\* “Participation: The New Tyranny?” Cooke and Kothari (2001) \**

**The absence of comprehensive participatory inputs of substance ensures outcomes somewhere between **failure** and **limited success**.**



# **PARTICIPATION**

**(practically speaking)**

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**Participation is “rule” based.**

**Different stakeholders’ interests are different, and their input is of varying value at different times (both on the calendar and relative to the assessment and planning process) and relative to different topical arenas.**

**Assessors and planners must necessarily make judgments about who will participate, when, how much, through what vehicle, and to what, but...**

**...better to err on the side of too much participation rather than too little.**